

Response to Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn et al on Nandigram

Tuesday 11 December 2007, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2007).

We read with growing dismay the statement signed by Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn and others advising those opposing the CPI(M)'s pro-capitalist policies in West Bengal not to "split the Left" in the face of American imperialism. We believe that for some of the signatories, their distance from events in India has resulted in their falling prey to a CPI(M) public relations coup and that they may have signed the statement without fully realising the import of it and what it means here in India, not just in Bengal.

We cannot believe that many of the signatories whom we know personally, and whose work we respect, share the values of the CPI(M) - to "share similar values" with the party today is to stand for unbridled capitalist development, nuclear energy at the cost of both ecological concerns and mass displacement of people (the planned nuclear plant at Haripur, West Bengal), and the Stalinist arrogance that the party knows what "the people" need better than the people themselves. Moreover, the violence that has been perpetrated by CPI(M) cadres to browbeat the peasants into submission, including time-tested weapons like rape, demonstrate that this "Left" shares little with the Left ideals that we cherish.

Over the last decade, the policies of the Left Front government in West Bengal have become virtually indistinguishable from those of other parties committed to the neoliberal agenda. Indeed, "the important experiments undertaken in the State" - the land reforms referred to in the statement - are being rapidly reversed. According to figures provided by the West Bengal state secretary for land reforms, over the past five years there has been a massive increase of landless peasants in the state due to government acquisition of land cheaply for handing over to corporations and developing posh upper class neighbourhoods.

We urge our friends to take very seriously the fact that all over the country, democratic rights groups, activists and intellectuals of impeccable democratic credentials have come out in full support of the Nandigram struggle.

The statement reiterates the CPI(M)'s claim that "there will be no chemical hub" in Nandigram, but this assurance is itself deliberately misleading. This is the explanation repeatedly offered by CPI(M) for the first round of resistance in Nandigram - that people reacted to a baseless rumour that there would be land acquisitions in the area. In fact, as the Chief Minister himself conceded in the State Assembly, it was no rumour but a notification issued by the Haldia Development Authority on January 2, 2007 indicating the approximate size and location of the projected SEZ, which triggered the turmoil.

The major factor shaping popular reaction to the notification was Singur.

Singur was the chronicle of the fate foretold for Nandigram. There, land was acquired in most cases without the consent of peasant-owners and at gun-point (terrorizing people is one way of obtaining their consent), under the colonial Land Acquisition Act (1894). That land is now under the control of the industrial house of the Tatas, cordoned off and policed by the state police of West Bengal. The

dispossessed villagers are lost to history. A fortunate few among them will become wage slaves of the Tatas on the land on which they were once owners.

While the CPM-led West Bengal government has announced that it will not go ahead with the chemical hub without the consent of the people of Nandigram, it has not announced any plans of withdrawing its commitment to the neo-liberal development model. It has not announced the shelving of plans to create Special Economic Zones. It has not withdrawn its invitation to Dow Chemicals (formerly known as Union Carbide, the corporation responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in Bhopal) to invest in West Bengal. In other words, there are many more Nandigrams waiting to happen.

In any case, the reason for the recently renewed violence in Nandigram has been widely established to have nothing to do with the rumour or otherwise of a chemical hub. Print and visual media, independent reports, the governor of West Bengal (Gopal Gandhi) and the State Home Secretary's police intelligence all establish that this round of violence was initiated by the CPI(M) to re-establish its control in the area. We all have seen TV coverage of unarmed villagers barricaded behind walls of rubble, while policemen train their guns on them.

With the plans it has for the future, regaining control over Nandigram is vital for the CPI(M) to reassure its corporate partners that it is in complete control of the situation and that any kind of resistance will be comprehensively crushed. The euphemism for this in the free marketplace is 'creating a good investment climate'.

The anti-Taslima Nasreen angle that has recently been linked to the Nandigram struggle against land acquisition is disturbing to all of us. However, we should remember that it is largely Muslim peasants who are being dispossessed by land acquisitions all over the state. There is a general crisis of confidence of the Muslim community vis-à-vis the Left Front government, inaugurated by the current Chief Minister's aggressive campaign to "clean up" madarsas, followed by the revelation of the Sachar Committee that Muslim employment in government jobs in West Bengal is among the lowest in the country. While we condemn the attempts to utilize this discontent and channelize it in sectarian ways, we feel very strongly that it would be unfortunate if the entire anger of the community were to be mobilized by communal and sectarian tendencies within it. Such a situation would be inevitable if all Left forces were seen to be backing the CPI(M).

This is why at this critical juncture it is crucial to articulate a Left position that is simultaneously against forcible land acquisition in Nandigram and for the right of Tasleema Nasreen to live, write and speak freely in India.

History has shown us that internal dissent is invariably silenced by dominant forces claiming that a bigger enemy is at the gate. Iraq and Iran are not the only targets of that bigger enemy. The struggle against SEZ's and corporate globalization is an intrinsic part of the struggle against US imperialism.

We urge our fellow travellers among the signatories to that statement, not to treat the "Left" as homogeneous, for there are many different tendencies which claim that mantle, as indeed you will recognize if you look at the names on your own statement.

Mahashweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Sumit Sarkar, Uma Chakravarty, Tanika Sarkar, Moinak Biswas, Kaushik Ghosh, Saroj Giri, Sourin Bhattacharya, Nirmalangshu Mukherji, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Swapan Chakravorty, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Anand Chakravarty, Apoorvanand, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Nivedita Menon, Aditya Nigam

P.S.

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